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TAGS: CASC PGOV PHUM BF
SUBJECT: TRAVOLTA EXTORTION PLOT GRABS GCOB BY THE HORNS

REF: 08 NASSAU 863

Classified By: Charge Zuniga-Brown for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The GCOB has confronted head-on an alleged attempt to extort 25 million dollars from U.S. actor John Travolta after the accidental death of his teenage son. Acting on a complaint from the bereaved family, authorities arrested and charged two alleged plotters, including an opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) Senator, fuelling a national political scandal. The case arose mere days after a major revamping of senior national police commanders. The speed of police action apparently vindicated recent GCOB efforts to streamline law enforcement and tackle corruption. The role of prominent opposition leaders in the plot is hugely embarrassing and seriously damaging to the opposition PLP as a whole, while the Free National Movement (FNM) government profits in comparison. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION SENATOR CHARGED IN SCHEME

¶2. (U) Opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) Senator Pleasant Bridgewater was arraigned in Nassau January 28 and charged with conspiracy and abetting an alleged extortion attempt. A paramedic who initially assisted Mr. Travolta's teenage son, who died January 2 during a family vacation on Grand Bahama Island, stands charged with extortion. Senator Bridgewater was freed on 50 thousand dollars bail, and ordered to reappear in court February 12. Ms. Bridgewater resigned her Senate seat January 24, after being arrested and briefly held in connection with the plot January 22, before posting 40 thousand dollars bail. In public statements, she said she resigned in order to protect the party's reputation, maintaining her innocence and claiming she acted legally and ethically as counsel for the Freeport man at the center of the alleged plot. He is charged with attempting to extort 25 million dollars from Travolta to suppress a document in his possession. A local newspaper, The Bahamas Journal claims the accused paramedic was in possession of a document signed by Mr. Travolta which in part instructed medical personnel to transport his son to the airport for immediate medical evacuation, rather than to the local hospital. The full content of the letter has not been released.

2ND OPPOSITION MP,S ROLE PROBED, 3RD IS TRAVOLTA LAWYER

¶3. (U) Another PLP leader and Member of Parliament (MP), Obie Wilchcombe, reportedly a friend of the Travolta family, was initially questioned by police over his role and released. He also maintains his innocence but remains at the center of ongoing speculation over the scandal's political fallout. Wilchcombe is the only PLP MP from Grand Bahama and the second prominent PLP leader whose career may be damaged by fallout from the affair. Ironically, a third PLP politician and leader of the opposition in the Senate, former Attorney General Allyson Maynard-Gibson, acted as local lawyer for the Travolta family. Her involvement may also

cause repercussions within the PLP, especially if she is called to testify as a prosecution witness against fellow PLP politician Bridgewater. There are reports that some in the party are resentful of her role in revealing the plot which led to the PLP leaders' disgrace.

OPPOSITION LEADERS DISGRACED, PARTY DAMAGED

¶4. (U) Hundreds of spectators and media, including partisans of both major parties, waited outside the Nassau courtroom when Bridgewater was arraigned, some chanting taunts and slogans both for and against her. News of the extortion plot has propelled The Bahamas once again into sensational TV reports and tabloid headlines in the U.S. and beyond. Many in and outside the government expressed fear the negative coverage may tarnish The Bahamas' international image as a desirable tourism destination.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) The tragedy for the Travolta family is playing out on the Bahamian political stage on a number of levels. The chain of recent events reflects well on the Grand Bahama police and national judicial authorities, who appear to be working professionally, transparently and expeditiously. GCOB authorities seem intent on getting to the bottom of the matter. Following the recent shake-ups in law enforcement agencies, partially aimed at tackling corruption (reftel), the course of events tends to vindicate the FNM government's promises of trust and accountability in government and demands for professionalism in the public sector. The swift arrests and prosecutions also send a strong and welcome signal to the Bahamian public that official corruption may not be tolerated, at least on the current government's watch, or perhaps just not in this case.

¶6. (C) The GCOB reaction contrasts sharply with the more lax attitudes and lack of accountability prevalent in similar situations under the former PLP government. The extortion scandal undoubtedly damages and disgraces the opposition PLP. With one opposition PLP leader disgraced, another tainted, and a third professionally involved on behalf of the victim, the big loser is the opposition PLP. The case not only brings back bad memories of past, high-profile PLP scandals)- a senior minister's involvement with Anne Nicole Smith)- but also the lack of consequences for any apparent impropriety. The fallout has revived speculation not only about the future of the longtime PLP leader, Perry Christie, but about the PLP's future as a party.

ZUNIGA-BROWN